

NEW 24-Hour PADDLING RECORD

*400,000 paddle strokes create
new entry in Guinness*

by Ian Adamson

How far can you paddle in 24 hours? A hundred miles? Two hundred miles?

That's the question we set out to answer this summer at the Yukon River Quest, a 450-mile race held each June between White Horse and the famous gold rush town of Dawson City.

For dedicated distance paddlers the Yukon provides an excellent venue to rack up miles in a wilderness setting. The river at that time of year is swift and deep; more than 20 hours of daylight make paddling easy; and there are few rapids.

My association with the Yukon started in 1998 when I attempted to break my existing Guinness 24-hour kayak record of 203 miles, set in 1997. Wild fires, low water and head winds limited that record to 217 miles, so I went back in 2003 for another attempt. But even lower water and a wrecked support boat ended the paddle after 146 miles. British marathon kayaker Jerome Truran and California surf skier Mike Shea committed to attempt it with me this year. Futura gave each of us a customized 21-foot racing surf ski and logistics support, and guide Heinz Sauer added local river knowledge, a support boat and healthy dose of local color.

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Guinness Grind: Adamson en route to breaking the 263-mile mark.

We would paddle from Lower Lake Laberge to somewhere north of Fort Selkirk, a historic settlement 214 miles downstream. Each of us had exceptional ultra-distance paddling experience, including Jerome's Yukon River Quest win in 2003 and Mike's six-man win in the Texas Water Safari in 1996. We each wanted to win and set a new record, and with good conditions and no major mistakes, it seemed likely one of us would. On June 20, hot weather and rising water spelled excellent conditions for our attempt. We dug our paddles into calm water as the second hand hit 12:30 p.m. Mike quickly outdistanced us with his immense strength and low cadence strokes.

Paddling for distance over time requires a different strategy from paddling for time over distance. You need to find the fastest current, which means your net speed is slower, but your distance covered is greater. Because this strategy takes experience and technological assistance, we each used a Garmin GPS to track time, distance and speed, allowing us to evaluate our progress and find the fastest current.

On the Yukon, which can be up to 400 yards wide, route choice is critical, and having a GPS gives you instant feedback on your speed. You might choose a dead end, or shallow, slow-moving section with no choice but to continue downstream until you find fast water again. Each of us made different choices, and the lead changed several times over the first eight hours. Remarkably, we stayed within sight of each other, each taking two-minute re-supply breaks every few hours. And we were all suffering from sore buttocks, a common ailment in ultra distance kayaking.

The seating position in a race kayak makes rear-end comfort challenging because you sit with your feet only an inch or two lower than your seat. This creates an acute angle between your torso and thighs, pressuring your buttocks. Each stroke's twisting motion exacerbates the pressure, and most kayakers end up with extreme undercarriage pain, leg cramps and back pain. I had finessed my seat and ended up with a customized multi-layer foam pad. The three inches of additional height increased comfort and leverage, but decreased stability. Jerome and Mike had similar set ups, although the butt pain finally got to be too much for Jerome and he dropped out after 10 hours and 125 miles. Paddling a few miles behind us, he decided it wasn't worth continuing for second or third place.

By the 12th hour, I had covered 137 miles, with Mike at 135. Our support crew traversed between Mike and me, providing progress updates, moral support and food bags. At 2:30 a.m. I saw the motor boat fly past in a parallel channel, unaware of my location. As the hours ticked by I ran out of food, and then water, and finally made radio contact. After about five hours I heard the happy hum of the boat's engines and pulled alongside to get a re-supply and news of Mike. I was severely depleted and worried that Mike was now ahead, but was relieved to hear he was still behind.

Eating and drinking in a paddle of this nature is challenging since most of the blood is shunted away from the digestive tract to the working muscles, making it hard to eat without feeling nauseous. My food bags contained sandwiches and canned meals, Balance Bars for lasting energy, Sobe Adrenaline Rush drinks to stay awake, potato chips for salt, and Ensure to help replace protein and nutrients. My strategy: eat something every 30 minutes, knowing I was expending 12,000 calories at high output. Doing this meant I would consume around 6,000 calories, with the remainder coming from stored body fat, and resulting in a 1- to 2-pound loss in body weight.

With five hours left, my GPS read 209 miles, so I knew we would both break the record, and it was possible I could break the 250-mile barrier. It took me about an hour to feel re-hydrated and fueled up, and by then I had passed the 1998 mark of 217 miles. Unfortunately, with a warm sun on my back and long, hazy straight-aways, I began to feel sleepy and my mental acuity and physical performance deteriorated. Kayaking for 24 hours means you are actually awake for considerably longer. It's difficult to sleep the night before, and several hours transpire from the time you wake up until the start. By now I had been awake for almost 48 hours and found myself nodding my head and jerking awake every few minutes.

With the old record now put away I had to find motivation to keep moving. Mike was dropping farther back, so I focused on reaching the magic 250-mile mark. At 10:20 a.m. my Garmin clicked off 240 miles so I knew I had it. My next goal: 262 miles, the distance of the Texas Water Safari, a mark most people said was impossible. As my timer hit 24 hours, I read off 263.4 miles.

My crew was with me for the last hour and captured the moment on video, with Mike gritting it out for 220 miles, breaking the old record handily. All said and done, it was a remarkable team effort and an experience worth every one of the 400,000 paddle strokes. ▼



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